

WHEN FEMINISTS EXCOMMUNICATE

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If you're aware of social media, you probably saw a post going around last week about Kim Kardashian. Some feminist called Kim out for posing nude and calling it "feminist." No, the feminist insisted, it's not feminist just because you said it is. It's just recycling the old sexist stuff and pretending that because you're in charge, it's OK now. If the women are getting paid for it, then it's all right? Of course it isn't.

And a couple of years before that, it was Miley Cyrus being taken down by Sinéad O'Connor because she was allowing herself to be degraded by putting herself in a music video with a disgusting sexist who was also making Miley a ton of money. Sinéad promised Miley that she would regret this later in life and offered her advice from an older, wiser perspective: to have more respect for herself and her body.

These are only two examples of the feminism wars currently going on. And I remember participating in the war. I cheered Sinéad O'Connor and re-posted her letter to Miley. I was disgusted by Miley's actions and considered her a deluded teenager who was being used by the men around her. Only now, it seems maybe it wasn't quite that simple an equation. I'm not trying to either glorify Miley or excuse her here. My point is that there seems to be a particular brand of feminism which is the "right" brand and which feels self-righteous enough to go around pointing the finger at all the other kinds of feminism and telling them that they aren't "right." Women having power isn't enough. They have to have the "right" kind of power. They have to do it in the "right" way, the feminist way, the equality kind of way.

Do you remember the feminist backlash against *Twilight* and against its Mormon creator, Stephenie Meyer? You may also recall that the

backlash was a hundred times worse against the women who loved *Fifty Shades of Grey* and against its creator, E. L. James. These two women wrote about female characters who find power in their relationships with the men in their lives. They wrote primarily to female audiences. They made a ton of money doing it. But they didn't do it the "right" way. They just fell back on all the old stereotypes about men and women. They weren't the "right" kind of feminists.

It reminds me of a former friend of mine who wrote an angry comment on one of my *Huffington Post* essays saying that I wasn't a "real" Mormon anymore. Who decides who is a real Mormon? Well, there's an official process for this in Mormonism, an authority who decides if you get kicked out. But being a "real" feminist or not is fraught with many more complications. There is no council of proper feminists. Nor is there an appeal process if you think you've been treated badly.

And yet, I am as guilty of pointing the finger at other women and saying they aren't feminists as anyone else. I am still processing the reaction to a couple of my feminist posts at *The Huffington Post*, one called "If We Don't Feel Oppressed, Are We?" and another "What It's Like to Be a Mormon Woman."¹ The first one I wrote in an attempt to speak to Mormon women who complain that, since they don't feel oppressed, the fault must be in the women who do feel oppressed, or not in the system itself, but in the local male authorities (leadership roulette). I'm afraid that what I did instead was to make women feel as if they weren't "real" women or that their way of finding power and wielding it wasn't "real."

In the second essay, I meant to describe what it would be like for a non-Mormon to slip into the body of a Mormon woman and what differences might surprise them. I'm afraid that it came off as condem-

1. "If We Don't Feel Oppressed, Are We?," *The Huffington Post*, Jul. 22, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-ivie-harrison/if-we-dont-feel-oppressed_b_7834070.html; "What It's Like to Be a Mormon Woman," *The Huffington Post*, Sept. 29, 2015, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mette-ivie-harrison/mormon-woman_b_8208328.html.

natory and even mocking, as if I were saying that the habits of being a Mormon woman are ridiculous and outdated and that our modesty habits are silly.

I realized after reading some very angry reactions from traditional Mormon women that I had made them feel very much the way that I felt when I read a statistical analysis of the attitudes of working men toward working women. The report castigated women who choose to stay at home because it makes their husbands statistically more likely to treat women badly in the workplace. I felt I was being blamed for being a “bad” feminist and choosing what was right for my life, which was, in my opinion, staying home with my children. All of the sexist men in the world were my fault because I wasn’t working, or so it seemed.

The reality is that if you look at a long list of women who have used their own power in their own lives, you get a wide range of choices. Think about the following. Do they count as “real” feminists?

Jane Austen?

Harriet Beecher Stowe?

Emma Watson?

Beyoncé?

Taylor Swift?

Ruth Bader Ginsburg?

Gloria Steinem?

Chieko Okazaki?

Kate Kelly?

Neylan McBaine?

Marjorie Pay Hinckley?

Bonnie Oscarson?

Who has the right to decide which of these women count as real feminists and which do not? Do any of us?

When I was in graduate school writing a dissertation on a forgotten woman author of eighteenth-century Germany, I was told on multiple occasions that I wasn't feminist enough. Why?

First, I had changed my name when I married. My decision was made after months of careful consideration. I could see no real way in which I could take my mother's name. Her last name was, after all, her father's, and on and on forever. I could only choose between keeping my father's name (with whom I had a very strained relationship) and taking my husband's (who helped empower me in many ways). I chose to take my husband's name.

Second, I got pregnant when I was in graduate school. On purpose. And planned to alter my career aspirations to care for my child.

Third, I was writing about a woman writer (Sophie von La Roche) who had eight children and, after her husband's death, supported them financially with her writing—which was all about traditional girls empowering themselves with traditional femininity.

Fourth, I knitted in class.

Fifth, I was a Mormon. One of my professors, Elaine Showalter, once told me that the greatest cause of women's oppression was religion and it was the first thing one had to give up to be a feminist.

Sixth, I read and wrote romance novels, which were the most repetitive and unliterary and repressive of all genres.

So for a long time, I wasn't sure I counted as a "feminist." While I was busily writing young adult novels with "strong female characters" to the ever-growing audience of young adult and adult female readers, raising three daughters to question stereotypes of femininity outside and inside of Mormonism, I tried to find other words for my ideas about gender non-conformity.

About a year or so ago, I had an online conversation with another YA author in which she insisted that everyone really was feminist and

we should all just admit it. I said that I had long had trouble with the term “feminist” and wasn’t sure what she meant by it at all. She said that feminist just means that you believe men and women are equal. When I asked her what equal means, she stopped responding. This seems to happen a lot because people imagine that “equality” is a simple term and that I am being argumentative in asking for a definition. But I actually think that defining equality is very difficult—perhaps even impossible.

Does “equality” mean:

- Equal pay for equal work?
- Equal treatment under the law?
- Equal treatment by the health care system?
- Equal opportunity in education?
- In military combat?
- Free access to birth control?
- Alimony payments?
- Shared custody of children in a divorce?

That is to say, is equality ignoring physical differences in men and women? Or is it trying to ameliorate them? Is it believing that men and women are essentially the same? Or seeing them as essentially different and in need of different assistance?

I am concerned about the ways in which I see patriarchy swallow up the demands of feminism and use them against women. Each time we gain something, it is turned in the service of the patriarchy. I’m thinking of things like women starring in more television shows—but what kinds of roles are they given? I’m even thinking of something as basic to American political white feminism as abortion, which has become a new kind of oppression for some women who are forced into abortions by the very men who are abusing them sexually.

The reality is that there isn't just one kind of feminism that serves all women equally well. I want to talk about two types of feminism, with the understanding that these are not the only kinds of feminism but that they are two opposing kinds and are at work frequently in Mormonism. The first kind of feminism is one I call "American political white feminism." The second I call "French feminism."

American political white feminism is, as a male friend of mine described it, feminism that demands men and women are the same in every way that matters. It denies the body and it denies traditional femininity as having any value. Male virtues tend to be the ones that all should aspire to. This means that women who are more masculine tend to get more power and women who are traditionally feminine are sometimes mocked or pitied. If you want to have power, you just have to act more masculine. Stop apologizing, stop wearing makeup and dressing in provocative clothing. Stop having children and changing your name when you marry. Stop staying home as a child caregiver. Get a job and continue to climb the ladder of the corporate world until you reach the glass ceiling and can break it open. Don't let men talk down to you. Call them out on sexism. Be aggressive. Point out when you're being treated badly simply because you're a woman.

But French feminism—and I'm using that term a little loosely here, I admit—is a feminism in which traditionally feminine qualities are applauded and valued. The female body and its cycles are spoken of openly, written about in artistic ways, drawn, and sculpted. Femininity is applauded in male bodies as well as in female ones. There is no rule about who is allowed to be feminine and who isn't. Makeup, soft voices, childbearing, alluring clothing, feminine mystique—all are part of femininity and are treated as worthy of investigation and equal treatment as traditionally male qualities such as power and aggression.

When I first heard about French feminism, I thought that it fit well within Mormonism and our ideas of a Heavenly Mother who embodies divinely feminine qualities, and Eve, who took the fruit because she

understood the need for mortal life with its pain and was willing to be the vessel of the human race. But French feminism (and traditional Mormon feminism) are not without problems. As many before me have pointed out, this feminism can simply reify the polarity between men and women. It can feel like a prison to women who do not fit into traditional feminine modes and it seems to emphasize the body above all else.

Indeed, I could argue that the early days of the Relief Society were very much along the lines of French feminism, with separate spheres for male and female spiritual work. It has only been correlation that has put women in a subordinate position to male priesthood authority. Perhaps. Or perhaps it is correlation that has caused us to reconsider the value of separate spheres in the first place. Do we want to go back to separate spheres or do we need to find another model entirely? And what might that new and different model look like?

Let's go back to American political white feminism, which has been criticized much lately for its lack of intersectionality, or the desire to include women of color and transgender women. When I was talking online about this speech last week, one of my friends said in a parting comment meant to inspire me, "Crush patriarchy." All I could think of was that it was a particularly patriarchal thing to say. War-like metaphors and the goal of crushing a political structure are masculine ways to think and interact in the world. If we, as women and feminists, are trying to crush patriarchy, aren't we just falling back into patriarchy by assuming that the only power to be had is masculine power? How can we imagine a system outside of patriarchy when our dream of success is so enmeshed in patriarchal views of the world?

In conclusion, let me talk about Mormon feminism. There are many strains of Mormon feminism currently at work:

- Ordain Women
- Let Women Pray

- Heavenly Mother feminists
- Mother Eve feminists
- Mormon historians excavating Mormon women's history

And then there are women within the Church who would never think of themselves as “feminists” (because that is a dirty word) but who regularly use their power (dare we call it priesthood?) to bless the lives of others, male and female, around them. Is one of these kinds of feminism better than the others?

I am hoping that there is some way that we can find it within ourselves to listen more to other women with their own diverse ways of being feminist, even if they don't call themselves feminists at all. I am hoping that we stop excommunicating each other for being “not feminist enough” and try instead to celebrate women around us whom we find worthy of celebration, in all their different wonders.

In doing so, I hope to make feminism more inclusive and more affirming. The very idea that someone else's idea of right living in the world as a woman is too small and needs to be bigger is surely one of the most masculine ways of seeing the world—and one of the least useful. Instead of proving who is best in some weird phallic contest that makes no sense for women anyway, let's invite everyone who wishes to join and learn even from those who don't call themselves feminists about ways to be women, to have power, and to act out our own desires in the world.

In the end, I find myself turning back to the German philosopher Theodor Adorno, whom I studied in graduate school in perhaps the most sexist institution that has ever existed, Princeton University. When I went to Princeton from Brigham Young University, I imagined I was entering an elite, liberal bastion of education where there would be no more sexism and no more assumptions about what women could or couldn't do—or should or shouldn't do.

Instead, I found that there were *no* tenured female faculty members in our department. When asked why not, the professors told us with all

sincerity that there simply weren't any women *on the planet* who were qualified to teach at Princeton. And so they were going to develop them in-house. There were three assistant professors who were women while I was at Princeton. All of them left after experiencing some terrible form of sexism from the other professors, who continually told them that their work on women writers wasn't worthy of Princeton University. I was told I could not do my dissertation on an obscure female writer unless I compared her to the greatest male German writer of all time, Goethe. Of the twenty greatest works of German literature we were tested on for our candidacy, none were written by women. And when I was in a class on German Romanticism by the Dean of the Graduate School and asked him why there were no women on the list, he said we didn't have "time" for minor writers.

Back then, I hated Theodor Adorno's insistence on critique. He refused to endorse any political party or any candidate. He refused to describe what a utopia would look like. He did this because he still felt he was enmeshed in the old system and anything he did to try to point to a new one would be tainted. I find myself in my older years feeling very much like Adorno as I try to describe a new feminism. I criticize more than I support any one system. Which one is right? They are all wrong. But they each have things to teach us about who we are and about what might come after (if I may end with such a religious image) this world is washed away.